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A tight little miniseries on British espionage

By Christopher Swan

If British espionage were half as good as British spy thrillers, the Kremlin would have long since become an open book to the folks at 10 Downing Street.

Then again, the British intelligence service that one encounters in these thrillers is as messy, riddled with human error, duplicitous, unreliable, and perverse in its own way as any big-power spook factory; and headlines over the years regarding the high jinks and betrayals among the men and women who do England's spying bear this image out, at least in part.

Now, here's *Man From Moscow* (PBS, Fridays, Feb. 1, 8, 15, 9-10 p.m., check local listings) to give further dramatic evidence that there are few good guys in the war of stolen secrets, only those working for good causes.

Drawn from the published remembrances of Greville Wynne, the British businessman who played a high-level

messenger role for the British intelligence, this tight little miniseries recounts how Wynne recruited Oleg Penkovsky, a Red Army colonel and high-ranking member of Soviet military intelligence.

Penkovsky turned out to be one of the most valuable finds of his kind ever, telling the United States and Britain in advance about the building of the Berlin Wall and the installation of nuclear missiles in Cuba. He also turned out to be a person of some large convictions, as well as simple virtues

and vices. And thereby hangs Wynne's tale. A bond of honor and friendship grew up between the two men, one that endured through the ugly events that tore them apart.

It is because of this friendship, and meticulous care in the telling, that this tale of British and American spooks and their jointly run "client" becomes something special in the long run of British spy thrillers.

Any pretext for good British television seems opportune these days, even if it covers ground traversed by every stereotype of a James Bond flick or John le Carré novel. And you do sometimes get the feeling here that you are bumping over a pretty familiar road.

But there is another dimension to this production. Somehow it seems to have some motive other than to hook your attention with another nasty revelation about the folks who do questionable things in our name.

"Man From Moscow" attempts to show a nasty competition between the CIA and British intelligence, as well as a total lack of honor among many of those in high intelligence circles, at the same time it unravels the complex emotional tangle that grows up between people who are too human to play to win in this game of cunning and death.

In David Calder's portrayal of Wynne, we see all of that: a man who

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does what he does because of the compulsion to be involved, mingled with the echo of patriotism from his military service during the war. Aside from his ability to sweat profusely without ever rumpling his shirt front, Calder gives you every inch the British gentleman of his time and in another, far less simple world. To his peril, he believes passionately, underneath his sophisticated manners, in doing the right thing. He's a basically decent fellow.

Christopher Rozycki's Penkovsky is the perfect social naif, who has grown up in a world of underhandedness, as well as a society that kept him ignorant of the most basic freedoms enjoyed in the West. His insistence on meeting the Queen is touching reminder of his naiveté. Penkovsky's desperation is both personal and international: He is a man plagued by nightmares concerning himself and mankind.

It is in the detailed life surrounding these two figures that "Man From Moscow" scores many of its points.

Wynne's interrogator, a white-maned bear of a man, reeks of Soviet power plays and military bureaucracy. His "interpreter" has that athletic stamp and watchdog gaze of a KGB plant. His bewildered wife, who knows nothing of his doings, wonders why her marriage is coming apart ("Going away for the weekend, darling; golf clubs in the car. . . . Daddy, where did you get those bruises?").

Care in casting, and in many other details, makes this a convincing document of the world in which secrets are traded. It will come as no news that this world is not pretty. American CIA people are portrayed as hard and ruthless and dishonorable. British spy management comes off as gamy and foul under its "proper" manner and "playing by the rules." Both were eager to exploit any opportunity in the form of a willing fanatic with something to offer.

In the end, Penkovsky turned out to be just such a person. If he is to be believed, he did what he did because he was convinced the communist system had betrayed the Russian people. He also felt that the Soviet leadership was taking the world to the brink of nuclear annihilation. Probably for these reasons, he stayed too long at the game.

In another time, he would have been a hero. As it was, he became just another information container to be emptied and discarded.